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Security Council

Seventy-second year

Provisional

7987th meeting
Thursday, 29 June 2017, 9.35 a.m.
New York

President:	Mr. Llorentty Soliz	(Bolivia (Plurinational State of))
Members:	China	Mr. Zhang Dianbin
	Egypt	Mr. Aboulatta
	Ethiopia	Mr. Woldegerima
	France	Mr. Delattre
	Italy	Mr. Cardi
	Japan	Mr. Bessho
	Kazakhstan	Mr. Umarov
	Russian Federation	Mr. Safronkov
	Senegal	Mr. Ciss
	Sweden	Mr. Skoog
	Ukraine	Mr. Yelchenko
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Mr. Wilson
	United States of America	Mrs. Haley
	Uruguay	Mr. Rosselli

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East

Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016) (S/2017/541)

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The meeting was called to order at 9.35 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East

Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016) (S/2017/541)

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite Mr. Stephen O'Brien, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, to participate in this meeting.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I wish to draw the attention of Council members to document S/2017/541, which contains the report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions 2139 (2014), 2165 (2014), 2191 (2014), 2258 (2015) and 2332 (2016).

I now give the floor to Mr. O'Brien.

Mr. O'Brien: The conflict in Syria continues to grind on, day by day, month by month. It is a conflict where there can be no victory on the battlefield, a conflict which will not end by the use of force. All that this relentless, senseless fighting provides are hollow advances or retreats, leaving behind utter devastation for the civilians left in its wake. I do not need to paint a picture for Council members. Members have seen them, along with the rest of the world. It is an outraged world, not an indifferent world, an indignant, furious world that cannot understand why the Security Council cannot fix the conflict.

We must be clear: 13.5 million people are caught in a protection crisis that threatens their lives on a daily basis. It affects so many because we have seen time and again a complete, disgraceful disregard for the rules of war, which subjects civilians to the horrifying reality of bombs raining down on schools, hospitals and residential areas every day. The use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects in urban areas is unconscionable, with the utmost serious consequences for civilians in the immediate and long term. We know this. Those fighting know this. Those who support the different parties know it too. And certainly those civilians who have suffered years of war know this.

When explosive weapons are used in populated areas, 92 per cent of the people killed or injured are civilians — 92 per cent. And those who might be lucky enough to survive the bombs but whose homes are destroyed and are forced to flee face a whole new set of protection challenges, from mines and unexploded ordnance, to forced conscription, sexual abuse and violence, to restrictions on basic rights such as freedom of movement. It is our duty as fellow human beings to stand up and say, enough, to demand an end to these practices, to stop the needless death and to help those whose lives have already been destroyed.

Each month, the United Nations and humanitarian partners do all in our power, in the face of extreme difficulty, to reach those who are most in need. Again, my admiration for the courage and persistence of the humanitarian aid workers on the ground, from the United Nations and all our international and particularly national partners, knows no bounds, and I pay tribute to them. They should not be a target, but, sadly, in Syria today, they are.

So far this month we have reached the hard-to-reach locations of Talbiseh and Al-Rastan, in northern Homs, with convoys, and reached besieged east Harasta, in rural Damascus. Despite our best efforts, we continue to have supplies consistently removed from our trucks before we can even deploy. Nearly 200,000 treatments have been forcibly removed this year alone. The removal of these treatments is the removal of life-saving aid for those in need — treatments, medicines, a chance at life — and it must be brought to an end. We must be able to deliver based on need.

Further, the United Nations and humanitarian partners continue to be delayed and blocked by bureaucratic restrictions that limit our ability to reach civilians living in besieged and hard-to-reach areas. Delays in facilitation letters continue to slow the process for deploying inter-agency cross-line convoys. This need not be a cause for delay; they are not for the thousands of facilitation letters that are approved each month to areas where regular programming deploys. For example, the World Food Programme (WFP) requested 1,795 facilitation letters to provide aid, of which only three did not receive a positive response from authorities. Although the most egregious bureaucratic

restrictions are from the Government of Syria, we are increasingly seeing other groups operating in non-Government-controlled areas also implementing procedures that slow the process or impinge upon humanitarian principles.

I therefore call on all parties to the conflict to allow needs-based, unhindered and sustained access to humanitarian actors. They must also be safe. I am also placing on the record, here before the Council today — and asking it to do something about it — my specific concern regarding recent security threats against humanitarians delivering aid.

While we were eventually successful in delivering to east Harasta on 19 June, the case of an attempted convoy two days earlier illustrates the bureaucratic and security challenges faced by the United Nations and our humanitarian partners. Delays in loading the convoy resulted in a late departure from the warehouse, slowed further by long forced stops at checkpoints. After they sat for hours at the last Government of Syria checkpoint, the green light to remove the barriers and allow the trucks to cross was given only as evening approached. The security risk of waiting additional hours in the darkness while the barriers were removed was too great, so the decision was made to abort and return the next day. At that point, the convoy came under sniper fire as unknown gunmen lying in wait attacked. A Syrian Arab Red Crescent driver was hit and another grazed by sniper fire as the convoy began its return to Damascus.

I can report that, thankfully, the injured driver survived and is in stable condition. My thoughts and best wishes go out to him and his family. I condemn such acts in the strongest terms and call for accountability for those responsible. Those who deliberately direct attacks against humanitarian workers are committing war crimes.

The impact of the shots fired goes beyond any single person. They are an attack on the entire humanitarian community and, ultimately, a clear effort to prevent the delivery of aid to those in need. The safety of humanitarians going about their work is critical because in so many parts of Syria, they are the only lifeline for survival for communities trapped, injured and deprived by the conflict.

Changes in the access landscape have been shaped by the signing of local agreements between the Government of Syria and non-State armed opposition groups. These are agreements reached without the involvement of the United Nations. While the result of these agreements often means increased freedom of movement, commercial access and greater humanitarian access, they should not be viewed as entirely positive developments. They usually also include the relocation of those who fear reprisal or conscription, often to areas where they face serious security and protection concerns.

As a result of these changes, two towns have been removed from the list of besieged locations. The first is the town of Madaya, in rural Damascus. Following an agreement reached as part of the negotiations regarding the objectionable tit-for-tat arrangements for the four towns of Fo'ah, Kafraya, Madaya and Zabadani, access has improved in Madaya. The United Nations was able to conduct an assessment visit on 8 June, and the 25,000 to 30,000 civilians who remain in the town are now able to move in and out of the town by public transportation or private vehicle.

Secondly, the Al-Waer district of Homs city, where I visited, across the line, in December 2015, is also being removed from the besieged list. After reaching a local agreement in March, more than 19,000 individuals moved from the area to Idlib, Jarabulus and northern rural Homs. On 20 May, the Governor of Homs announced that the evacuation process was completed and that the area was again under Government of Syria control. As a result, access to the area has also been reopened, and the United Nations, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and non-governmental organizations are able to deliver to the area, in which an estimated 17,500 individuals remain.

There are now 11 besieged locations, with a total population of 540,000. Of these, seven are besieged by the Government of Syria, one by both the Government of Syria and non-State armed opposition groups, two by non-State armed opposition groups and one by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). I call once again for safe, unhindered and sustained access to all those in need, in particular for these 540,000 people, who are trapped and desperate for our assistance.

Notwithstanding the access challenges that remain in Syria, I would also like to acknowledge an important positive development on access. Earlier this month, WFP was able to successfully deploy a convoy of trucks from Aleppo, through Manbij and to Qamishli, in Al-Hasakah governorate. This is a key development, as

it will allow us to deliver at scale to north-east Syria, an area that has been short of supplies since the closure of the cross-border access point with Turkey in December 2015. While we have been able to deliver assistance via an air bridge from Damascus, the operation was expensive. The annual savings from moving the mode of delivery from air to land are equivalent to the cost of providing food aid for 100,000 people for one year. And as needs increase, we should now be able to deliver at scale.

This is particularly important with growing needs in north-east Syria due to anti-ISIL operations in the area. We have reports of civilian deaths by air strikes in the region, including one that resulted in the deaths of a reported 59 people, leaving another 70 wounded, in Abu Kamal, in eastern Deir ez-Zor governorate, on 15 May. At the same time, civilians in these areas face continued threats from ISIL. The air strike in Abu Kamal was followed by reported retributive attacks by ISIL against those whom they accused of providing coordinates.

We have similar concerns in Raqqa city, where on 6 June the Syrian Democratic Forces, supported by coalition forces, began an operation to take the city from ISIL, and in the past few days have fully encircled it. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights said yesterday that at least 173 people had reportedly been killed by air and ground strikes since 1 June. Conditions inside the city are reported to be dire, with limited access to food, water and basic services. While nearly 25,000 people have fled since the latest phase of operations began, the number of those remaining in the city is estimated to be between 50,000 and 100,000. People fleeing fighting in Raqqa face a variety of risks, including punitive measures by ISIL, threats posed by mine contamination, family separation, forced recruitment at checkpoints and concerns for the displaced who enter camps and whose identification is taken away or withheld and their movement restricted. People are terrified and do not know where to go for safety. We must do more to see that the civilians who are caught up in this fight are protected. I am sure that members can imagine being caught up, through no fault of one's own, not knowing what decision to make, and especially what decision to make for one's children.

The United Nations and its humanitarian partners are responding to the needs of those who leave as part of its broader response in the north-eastern region. Between 8 and 15 June, food assistance was delivered to more than 94,000 people, while 24 tons of medicine were dispatched to hospitals in Al-Hasakah and Qamishli towns, as well as to camps in Mabrouka, Ayn Issa and Al-Karama in Raqqa and Al-Hasakah governorates.

The signing, on 4 May, of a memorandum on the creation of de-escalation areas created an opportunity to improve the situation of many civilians in Syria. It is critical to ensure that de-escalation succeeds and that we can see a sustained calm in those areas. The temporary reduction of violence in some areas is a positive development. However, others are seeing not just continued fighting but even an increase. I am particularly concerned about the situation in Daraa, where intense aerial bombardment and fighting has resulted in civilian deaths and further damage to civilian infrastructure. The fighting is also getting close to the southern border and has resulted in delays to some cross-border humanitarian shipments from Jordan. Despite the insecurity that has caused delays, the United Nations and its partners have been able to continue cross-border deliveries to those in need. As we sit comfortably around this table, however, we should never underestimate the sheer courage it takes for the humanitarian aid workers there on the ground to persist with such deliveries. We owe them protection, as well as our limitless thanks and financial support.

I should also highlight the fact that we are delivering aid to those in the Berm and have now reached 75 per cent of the population at Ruqban since the second cycle started, in early May. Our access to both Berm areas is in large part owed to the strong support we receive from the Government of Jordan. I would like to thank the Jordanian authorities for their positive collaboration. I look forward to their increased support in ensuring that lifesaving assistance continues to be delivered to the people in need. As the United Nations and humanitarian partners are working on the ground to reach those people, I remain hopeful that the results of next week's meeting in Astana on de-escalation will bring about a positive development and see a sustained reduction in the fighting and, along with that, improved and unhindered humanitarian access to these areas.

In conclusion, I repeat my call to the Council to act now to protect civilians. I urge those sitting around this table who are active in the conflict to fully incorporate the protection of civilians into their military planning, and those with influence on the parties to the conflict to prioritize the protection of civilians in all engagements with them. These are legal obligations under the laws of war, and they should not be bent, broken or avoided.

Accountability is key and, of course, wherever possible, evidence is being collected, photographed, documented, preserved and stored for use in the appropriate courts in due course — preferably soon, so as to deter the continued flagrant and even blasé disregard for life and the law that we are seeing. I therefore call on all Council members to do more to ensure humanitarian access, thereby enabling us to reach those in need. While the besieged population's numbers have once again decreased, their needs remain great, and those who have moved to other hard-to-reach areas continue to require our urgent and sustained support as well.

Immediate steps must be taken to preclude further attacks on humanitarian workers. That is not solely a matter of humanitarian protection; it is about ensuring that those in need can continue to be reached. One important step in that regard is to end the bureaucratic delays that leave convoys vulnerable because they are waiting at checkpoints or operating at night. Another is to ensure there is no impunity for such attacks. I also urge those with influence to identify and, where possible, help to secure the release of the 29 United Nations staff members who are missing or detained in Syria.

Finally, and most important, we need to see a sustained reduction in violence, which is so necessary for progress on any front. Ending the fighting will ease the burden on civilians and create an environment conducive to assistance. Now is the time. It was the time last month, the month before and the year before. More delay, hauntingly, means more deaths, and more people maimed, more injured and more scarred in body and mind for the rest of their time on Earth. Will I be saying the same thing next month? Yes, if we sit on our hands or wring them impotently. This problem is in the Council's hands — but together, and jointly. I would urge Council members to hold one another's hands. Let us not just say "no more". In the name of humanity, let us deliver no more death for Syrians.

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): I thank Mr. O'Brien for his briefing.

The representative of Uruguay has asked for the floor to make a statement.

Mr. Rosselli (Uruguay) (*spoke in Spanish*): I would first like to thank Mr. O'Brien once again for his comprehensive briefing and for the years he has put in at the helm of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), working with unceasing courage at his humanitarian task, which we would like to highlight and for which we are deeply grateful. We are also grateful to his entire team, particularly the humanitarian workers on the ground, who risk their lives to bring aid to the civilians in need.

We condemn the recent attack of 17 June and would like to express our solidarity with the Syrian Red Cross staff who were injured. It is hard to understand how it can be that months and years have passed while we have continued to witness the frustration of OCHA, unable to carry out its mandated task because of security issues — or, even more incomprehensibly, owing to the refusal of the Government itself to authorize it. That is not a failure on OCHA's part, or for United Nations institutions generally, but it is a failure for the Security Council, which has not been able to influence the parties to the Syrian conflict — and by whom I mean all of the actors in the conflict — to change their attitude and enable relatively normal access for humanitarian aid and its regular delivery.

We in this Chamber are so accustomed to discussing this subject that we can forget the fact that this is a human tragedy that Syria has been enduring since 2011 — not just for the millions of refugees and displaced persons that the conflict has created, but also for the hundreds of thousands who have died or been wounded and for the destruction that has been inflicted on the country and that will take decades to rebuild. As usual, it is the most vulnerable who are most affected, including women, children and the elderly.

The protection of civilians in Syria has merely been vapid rhetoric that all parties to the conflict have continued to disregard and violate. The goals for Syria have been clearly defined and must be gradually achieved in order to be able to offer the Syrian people a future full of promise, after so many years of savagery. The first goal is, and must continue to be, achieving a political solution that would end the crisis and lead to a peaceful transition in Syria. The solution must be negotiated by all Syrians and backed by the international community. We trust that the good offices of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, Mr. Staffan de Mistura, will bring us closer to that goal.

In addition to the Geneva talks, the Astana process is also necessary for reducing the level of violence in Syria and, fortunately, the process has been yielding positive results. We support the efforts of the three guarantor countries and we believe that progress can

be made next week to consolidate the ceasefire so that the seventh round of Geneva talks with the parties can commence in a positive atmosphere.

Almost two months after the signing of the memorandum that established the safe zones, we have yet to receive official information on the implementation of that agreement. We are concerned about the fact that, to date, the United Nations has not been granted unhindered access to those areas. That would give some indication that the essential principles of international humanitarian law are being respected, such as humanitarian access, the prohibition of forced displacement, and freedom of movement, so that people can freely enter and leave those areas. The political process and the cessation of hostilities are only two of the ways to ensure that Syria begins a new chapter.

The third, equally important, issue continues to be the humanitarian dimension. We are still far from an encouraging outcome that could alleviate the suffering of the civilian population in Syria. Once again, we call for immediate, sustained and unhindered access to all besieged and hard-to-reach areas. However, our main goal must be to lift the unjustifiable and abhorrent siege on those areas.

For Uruguay, the protection of civilians in Syria and in any other conflict is the top priority. It is immoral to target civilians because they support one or other of the parties or because they find themselves in a certain area that is controlled by one or other of the parties. Delivering justice for the hundreds of thousands of innocent victims in the conflict is essential to achieving lasting peace in Syria and for the country and its entire population to overcome the horrors of the war.

Uruguay supported the establishment of an international impartial and independent mechanism to investigate crimes committed in Syria and hopes that it can begin its work shortly. We also support the request of Secretary-General António Guterres for the situation in Syria to be referred to the International Criminal Court.

Despite the adoption, one year ago, of resolution 2286 (2016), we continue to bear witness to the destruction of hospitals and health centres in Syria, which proves that the parties to the conflict have disregarded the resolution's provisions, thereby depriving thousands of people of their right to medical attention and leading to hundreds of victims among medical and health-care personnel. That is in serious violation of international humanitarian law and amounts to war crimes. The practice is also carried out on schools, markets and all kinds of civilian infrastructure. We condemn such attacks in Syria, Yemen and in any other place where they occur.

In conclusion, Uruguay underscores that the full and effective implementation of measures to ensure the cessation of hostilities, the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure and the facilitation of administrative procedures to allow for humanitarian access can, and must, make a major difference in the lives of the Syrian people, who, month after month, demand that the Security Council take concrete action. It is therefore imperative that that commitment be honoured as soon as possible. We trust that, as has occurred on previous occasions, the Council can overcome its differences and assume its responsibility in order to guarantee international peace and security.

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): There are no more names inscribed on the list of speakers.

I now invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion on the subject.

The meeting rose at 10.05 a.m.